

SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE AND COMMUNITY LIFE

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Mike Brill in his provocative *Places* article “Problems with Mistaking Community Life for Public Life” points out that our spatially defined social relationships have three basic forms: private life, public life, and community life, and that many critics of contemporary urban life have failed to distinguish between the latter two. “Some of our nostalgia and mourning is not for public life at all, not for the world of strangers; it is for something quite different, real and precious: local neighborhood life, community, a world of neighbors and friends, the parochial realm.”

I wholly concur with this statement, and in the discussion that follows, I attempt to define in design terms, and describe in social use terms, valuable place-settings for community life that have too often been overlooked or poorly understood.

In contemporary Western cities, we can identify four broad categories of outdoor space. The first category consists of private outdoor space which is owned by an individual and is accessible only to the owners, or those they invite onto their land. In this category would be yards of private homes, private estates, and so on. A second category consists of what is generally termed public space—areas such as neighborhood parks and streets which are publicly owned and accessible to all. A third category consists of spaces such as corporate plazas or a university campus, which are privately owned but accessible to the general public. A final category, which will be termed here shared outdoor space, is owned by a group and usually accessible only to members of that group. These would include community gardens, and the common landscaped areas of condominium developments, clustered housing, assisted living facilities, and cohousing; as well as historic precedents such as Baldwin Hills and Sunnyside Gardens. This category itself might be subdivided into two: facilities where it is often possible for a member of the general public to wander through (though they might be recognized as an outsider and asked: “May I help you...?”) and those such as private clubs, golf courses, and gated communities where it is virtually impossible to gain access unless you are a resident or member. For the purposes of this discussion, the term “shared outdoor space” will be applied to the first of the above two subcategories, and the remainder of the paper will discuss why it is important to focus on this particular—sometimes forgotten—element of the neighborhood landscape.

This form of space has many historic precedents, from monastic cloistered gardens, to the collegial courts of Oxford, to the grassy courtyards of Hampstead Garden Suburb, to the common greens of Radburn, N.J., to the courtyards of contemporary clusters of live-work lofts. The model of buildings enclosing a shared landscaped space is nothing new. It is essential that we look again at this important component of the neighborhood landscape, which, if carefully understood and sensitively designed, can provide a critically important transition space between

the privacy of the dwelling and the public-ness of neighborhood parks, through streets and town centers, and a setting for local social life and the safe play of children—the most vulnerable and environmentally sensitive residents of our towns and cities.

Many contemporary U.S. cities are expanding, densifying, and increasingly inhabited by mobile populations. Lengthy commutes, often by both adults in family households, leaves little time for fostering close ties with neighbors. Fear of crime (even if it is not justified by actual crime statistics) makes parents leery of allowing their children to spend time alone on public sidewalks, or walk alone to neighborhood parks. The increasing proportion of the population that is aging means that fewer have the energy to maintain private yards; condominium and retirement communities seem attractive choices, both because of access to shared outdoor space (which individuals don't have to maintain), and because of the potential for a greater sense of community. Parents raising young children, as well as some “empty nesters” and telecommuters, are attracted to innovative developments such as cohousing because of the potential of close neighborhood ties and safe pedestrian spaces for neighborly interaction and children's play. Because of these societal developments it seems appropriate at this time to look at shared outdoor space—what it has to offer, how it is designed, how it is used—and the pitfalls of confusing it with public outdoor space.

Five examples of shared outdoor space will be looked at in more detail. They are Southside Park, Sacramento, Calif.—a cohousing community established in 1993; Cherry Hill, an affordable housing scheme in Petaluma, Calif., opened in 1992; Village Homes, an initially controversial subdivision in Davis, Calif., completed in 1981; The Meadows, a traditional neighborhood block in Berkeley, Calif., where the backyard fences were removed in the 1970's; and St. Francis Square, San Francisco, a mid-density housing co-op, dating from 1964. In each of these, areas of shared landscaped space are heavily used by residents (particularly children); decisions about their use and upkeep are made by residents; and their presence and social significance add greatly to a sense of place and identity shared by residents. Evidence for the use and significance of these neighborhood landscapes will be drawn from systematic postoccupancy evaluation (POE) studies (in the case of Cherry Hill, The Meadows and St. Francis Square); and from more informal observations (of Southside Park and Village Homes).

SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE IN FOUR COMMUNITIES

St. Francis Square is a 299-unit middle-income co-op in the Western Addition district of San Francisco, completed in 1964. It was the first of many similar medium-density, garden apartment schemes built during the era of urban renewal in the 1960s to '70s. The client of St. Francis Square (the Pension Fund of the ILWU) challenged the designers (Robert Marquis, Claude Stoller, and Lawrence Halprin) to create a safe, green, quiet community that would provide an option for middle-income families who wanted to raise their children in the city. The site is 8.2 acres with a density of 36.5 units per acre.

The designers created a pedestrian-oriented site plan with parking on the periphery of the three-block site and the three-story apartment buildings facing inwards onto three thoughtfully landscaped courtyards. The three courtyards, each serving 100 households, became the shared outdoor space of the development and were critical to the strong sense of community that

quickly developed at St. Francis Square and has been characteristic of the development ever since.

The shared outdoor space, which is owned and maintained by the co-op, is critical to the community in a number of ways. It provides a green, quiet outlook with trees screening the view of nearby apartments, thereby reducing perceived density. It provides an attractive, safe landscape for children's play, with grassy slopes, pathways and play equipment—all within sight and calling distance of home. Sitting outside with a small child, walking home from one of the three shared laundries or from a parked vehicle, provides opportunities for adult residents to frequently see each other and stop for a chat. The courtyards at St. Francis Square became, in effect, the family backyard writ large. Littering and vandalism are infrequent. If these spaces had been the equivalent of a public park, accessible to all, it is very unlikely that they could have supported the strong sense of community that exists at St. Francis Square. Parents would not allow their children to play outside alone; residents would be less likely to help maintain the space, or challenge a stranger, or come out to help a neighbor in need. The whole development is tied to the surrounding neighborhood via north-south and east-west pedestrian paths through the site (but not through the shared courtyards) following the former street alignments of O'Farrell and Buchanan streets respectively.

A POE was conducted by this author in 1969-70, and this was confirmed and expanded by one year's participant observation when she lived there with her family (1973-74). Numerous site visits since, plus conversations with the current management, confirm that the basic findings of almost 30 years ago are still relevant today. The shared outdoor space at St. Francis Square is highly valued and well-used by residents because: (1) narrow entries between buildings clearly mark the passage from the public space of street and sidewalk into the shared space of landscaped courtyards; (2) the size of the courtyards (c. 150 x 150 feet) and the height-to-width ratio (c. 1:6), are such that they are human-scaled; (3) the courtyards are bounded by the units they serve and almost all units have views into the outdoor space (facilitating child supervision); (4) considerable attention and budget was focused onto the landscape elements of this shared space such that it is highly usable and attractive for adults and children, and has stood the test of time; (5) there is a clear distinction in the form of fenced patios, and/or "Keep off" landscaping between the private spaces of apartments and their outdoor space and the shared space of the courtyards; (6) there is easy access from apartments and patios into the courtyards.

Such is the success of St. Francis Square that it has served as a model for many comparable schemes in San Francisco and elsewhere, and there is a constant waiting list of people waiting to move in.

Village Homes is a 240-unit visionary neighborhood created and designed by Michael and Judy Corbett on the outskirts of the university town of Davis, California. A recent book by the Corbetts—*Designing Sustainable Communities: Learning from Village Homes* (Island Press, 2000)—documents the story of Village Homes from its beginnings as a "hippie subdivision," derided by banks and the local real estate industry, to its current status as "the most desirable neighborhood in Davis." At the core of Village Homes' success, both aesthetically and socially, is the use of shared outdoor space as the core structure of the neighborhood's design. This space consists of culs-de-sac access and a central common green. The long, narrow, tree-shaded dead-

end streets keep the neighborhood cooler in summer, save money on infrastructure, eliminate through traffic, and create quiet and safe spaces for children to play and neighbors to meet. An extensive pedestrian green at the heart of the neighborhood includes spaces for ball games and picnics, community-owned gardens, a vineyard and orchard, and drainage swales taking the place of storm sewers, reducing summer irrigation costs by one third and providing environments for wildlife and children's exploratory play.

This attractive environment—though accessible to outsiders bicycling and walking through—is definitely *not* a public park. Bounded by the inward-facing residences at Village Homes, it provides a green heart to the neighborhood, a safe and interesting area for children's play and adult exercise, and an environment which provides Village Homes with a strong sense of identity lacking in nearby grid-pattern subdivisions. A survey quoted in the Corbetts' book indicates that residents of Village Homes know, on average, 40 neighbors and have three or four close friends in the neighborhood. In a nearby standard subdivision, residents know an average of 17 neighbors and have one friend in the neighborhood.

Cherry Hill is a 29-unit development of townhouses for low and moderate-income families with children in Petaluma, a small town in Sonoma County, north of San Francisco. The client of this scheme was Burbank Housing Development Corporation, a nonprofit developer; the first residents moved in January 1992.

A major goal of the site plan was to provide a safe environment for the many children expected to live there and to support a sense of community among the residents. The Project Manager (John Morgan) had read about "woonerf," or residential precincts commonly employed as a means of calming traffic in northern Europe, in a book by this author (Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian 1986). When he asked where he could go see one—"The council needs to be convinced"—and was told the nearest was in Holland, he took the risk of pressing the designers (woman-owned firm Morse and Cleaver) to go ahead with the "woonerf" idea. The resultant site plan consists of a narrow (22-foot) access road which creates a one-way loop around a central green. Off this loop road are four paved courtyards permitting cars to drive up to each house and creating safe hard-surface play areas. As in European "woonerf," cars and pedestrians coexist safely without sidewalks since cars drive very slowly as they enter the development, their speed regulated by the narrow roadway, speed bumps, and the dead-end nature of the loop-plus-courtyards. Unlike the standard grid, no one enters Cherry Hill except residents or their visitors.

The success of these design decisions was confirmed by a POE study conducted by architecture graduate students in April 1993 under the direction of this author. Methods consisted of interviews with 17 of the 29 households, and seven and a half hours of observation and activity mapping of the use of the shared outdoor spaces.

Eighty-eight percent of the interviewed sample socialized with other families in their immediate courtyard; 64% with families elsewhere in Cherry Hill. Asked where they were most likely to bump into people they knew and stop for a chat, 94% cited their courtyard, 38% the central green, and 30% the street. Eighty-eight percent reported they would recognize a stranger walking in Cherry Hill and two-thirds were very satisfied with the site plan. Reasons cited for satisfaction were that it is safe for children, close, intimate, simple, homey, convenient, and

encourages community. The 18% “not satisfied” thought the courtyards created a “fish bowl” effect, the whole site was too tight, and the central green needed to be more visible. When asked how they would rate the sense of community at Cherry Hill, 71% rated it “strong” or “very strong.”

On visiting Cherry Hill today and reviewing the aggregate activity maps of observations in 1993, it is very clear that the dead-end cul-de-sac/“woonerf”-inspired site plan has been highly successful in facilitating a strong sense of community and providing for children’s play. During daylight, non-school hours, children are all over the neighborhood: rollerblading, rolling on the grassy slope, going round the loop on scooters, watching adults working on their cars, clustered around an ice cream truck. That parents perceive the roadway as safe is confirmed by the fact that they have formally designated two sections of it for games—four square and basketball. Virtually the only cars entering the site are those of residents, and it is *their* children who are at play, so they are extra careful. It seems reasonable to assume that were this a standard grid pattern neighborhood with through traffic and no shared outdoor space, there would be (1) less of a sense of community, and (2) much less outdoor play. Significantly, when asked if their children watched less TV after moving to Cherry Hill, 50% said that they did, the outdoors and many nearby playmates being far more attractive than the flickering screen. (The other 50% responded that they had no TV, or that their children watched about as often as they had in their previous residence.)

Southside Park cohousing is a 25-unit urban in-fill development in inner city Sacramento, California. It was designed by Mogavero Notestine and Associates in consultation with the residents, who number 67 (40 adults and 27 children). It was completed in 1993 with 14 market-rate, six moderate-income, and five low-income condominiums.

The site plan fits into the existing grid with most of the houses clustered around a common green on the interior of the block and the remainder (two rehabbed Victorians and several new units) in a smaller cluster across an alley.

Front porches mark the house entries from the street; back porches and patios look out onto the common green. Residents eat meals together several times a week in the 2,500 square foot common house. While there has been no systematic POE of Southside Park, many casual visits by this author confirm what the residents and the designers hoped for: that the many children are attracted to play in the safe, enclosed common outdoor space comprising lawns, pathways and a play equipment area; and that adult residents frequently meet while outdoors with their children, using the common laundry, working in the raised garden beds, walking back and forth to parking and the common house. As at St. Francis Square, Village Homes, and Cherry Hill, the sense of community and the range of children’s outdoor play opportunities at Southside Park are largely due to a site plan that curbs traffic flow and creates a central pedestrian green space which is shared by residents and is not generally accessible to the public. Ironically, the street-facing porches at Southside Park are used by residents when they are seeking *privacy*, since the shared outdoor space on the interior of the block is such a social space.

The Meadows is a city block in Berkeley, Calif., where the removal of backyard fences resulted in the creation of a park-like shared space at the center of the block. In the decade

1963-73, a Berkeley resident—at the time teaching real estate in the University of California School of Business—acquired twenty-seven properties in a block bounded by Derby, Dana, Carleton and Fulton streets. Most were single-family residences built between 1900 and 1920. In a conscious experiment to create a unique residential environment, he began (from 1971 on) to remove all the backyard fences, unused garages, extraneous outbuildings and paved areas, replacing them with grass, flowers, shrubs, trees and walkways. The residents—who were at the time, all his tenants—retained semi-private patios, lawns or planted areas close to their dwellings, and in addition began to enjoy the benefits of a park-like expanse in the middle of the block.

An MLA thesis by Roger G. Cavanna in 1974 compared this block with an adjacent control block (with regular fenced backyards), using standard POE techniques of a questionnaire survey, a survey of behavior traces, and a recording of activities. Residents in the block with shared outdoor space compared to those in the control block felt safer in the areas around their house, had a higher opinion of their neighborhood, spent more time outdoors at the back of the house, and considered their backyard environment to be more open, attractive and better maintained. Residents with access to the shared outdoor space knew more neighbors from all four adjacent streets (whose houses backed onto this space), whereas those in the control group knew mostly people on their block (i.e., next door or opposite on the street). Neighborhood boundaries as perceived by those on the study block were much tighter than those indicated by residents of the control block, suggesting that the central, park-like open space functioned as a neighborhood focus.

While this study was conducted almost thirty years ago, recent visits to this block reveal that the backyard fences have not been replaced despite the fact that most dwellings are now owner-occupied. The central open space is very well used for children's play, studying, sunbathing, barbecues, basketball, gardening, and the whole block has been named "The Meadows" by those who live there. Residents maintain their own private (but unfenced) yards and patios, as well as that portion of the shared outdoor space which is adjacent.

While The Meadows might be viewed as a "Berkeley 1960s" innovation, it follows in the footsteps of numbers of historic examples. The Macdougall-Sullivan garden in New York's Greenwich Village was created in the 1920s and consists of shared space measuring 40 by 200 feet in the interior of a city block. At one end is a play area and basketball court, at the other end a flower garden. Owners of 21 townhouses surrounding the garden retain small private areas that they can plant as they choose, but fences higher than four and a half feet are prohibited (Drayton, 2000).

In Boston's South End, Montgomery Park is one third of an acre entirely enclosed by 36 brick row houses. Established as a formal garden by the original builder of the houses in 1865, the neighborhood had become rundown and the shared space virtually abandoned by the mid-20th century. From the 1970s on, new residents removed debris, improved drainage, planted a lawn and perennial borders, took down fences, lobbied to have phone lines buried, removed a service road that encircled the park, and to improve security, restricted access from adjacent streets by installing locked gates. By the 1990s, the orientation of most of the buildings was toward the back. A brick pathway delineates private backyards from the shared space, and the lush interior

of the block with moveable garden furniture is used for informal dining and play, annual potlucks, weddings, birthday parties and garden tours. Maintenance is accomplished informally by neighborly trust and consensus, with a few agreed-upon rules (for example, dogs on a leash, parties indoors after 11:00 p.m., no chemical pesticides or fertilizers). Property values have markedly increased, but with a mix of single-family houses, apartments and affordable housing, Montgomery Park remains a diverse community in terms of age, income, ethnicity and life-style (Community Greens, no date).

Variations on The Meadows, Macdougall-Sullivan Garden, and Montgomery Park may provide ways of re-designing conventional suburban blocks where the residents—especially those with children—are looking for more neighborly lifestyles and settings for play that are safer and more stimulating than conventional sidewalks.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE

A review of the sites described above indicates that shared outdoor space can be a highly significant component of the neighborhood landscape if it meets the following criteria:

- (1) It is bounded by the dwellings it serves and is clearly not a public park;
- (2) Entry points into this space from a public street or sidewalk are designed so that it is clear that one is entering a setting which is not public space;
- (3) Its dimensions and the height-to-width ratio of buildings to outdoor space create a human-scaled setting;
- (4) Each dwelling unit bounding the shared outdoor space has access to an adequately sized private outdoor space (patio, yard, balcony) which forms a buffer between the residence and the common area;
- (5) There are clear boundaries and easy access between what is private (dwelling unit, patio, yard) and what is shared;
- (6) As much care is focused on the layout, circulation patterns, planting plan, furnishings, lighting, etc., of the shared outdoor space as is normally focused on the dwelling interiors. In particular, the design needs to focus on children (play equipment, paths for wheeled vehicles, areas for exploratory play, etc.) since research shows that children will comprise more than 80% of the users of such spaces if they are designed with the above criteria in mind.
- (7) The scale of such a space can vary from the urban, rectilinear courtyards of St. Francis Square to the more rambling suburban greenways of Village Homes as long as all the above six guidelines are followed, thus ensuring that the space is perceived as unambiguously neither private nor public, but *shared*.

The above details are critical. It was the *lack* of many or all of these characteristics that rendered the shared outdoor space of many postwar public housing projects, and many suburban

Planned Unit Developments of the 1960s, nonfunctional. Unfortunately, design critics observing that such spaces often became poorly maintained no-man's lands, assumed (wrongly) that they could never work (Coleman, 1985). There is ample evidence that, appropriately designed, not only do they *work*, but are actively sought after by people who are able to exercise choice over how they live. One example is the fact that all of the 51 cohousing communities so far completed in North America (as well as an additional 20 under construction) have chosen site plans where units face onto shared outdoor space (*Cohousing*, 2000). Another example is Community Greens: Shared Parks in Urban Blocks, a non-profit initiative based in Arlington, Virginia, which is currently documenting historic and contemporary shared outdoor space and consulting with developers, public officials and community leaders who are interested in implementing the community greens approach (see their website at www.communitygreens.org).

THE NEED FOR, AND BENEFITS OF, SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE

There is a further reason why we should look seriously at the forms of communities discussed above, clusters of individuals and families ranging from approximately 25 to 250 households. People are not being *forced* to live in such groupings, they are choosing to live there, and in the case of cohousing, working long and hard to bring them into being. What is happening, this author speculates, is a yearning for a community of neighbors whose size is such that one can recognize everyone; whose form is such that numerous casual encounters occur each day (the “compost” of community); and whose sense of ownership and control is such that subtle changes and modifications can be made to the shared environment as community needs change. People have a need to relate to a group which is larger than the family unit, but smaller than a planner-designated neighborhood. In brief, there is a need for community life as distinct from public life; shared outdoor space needs to be reconsidered as a venue for neighborly interaction, parallel to, and as a complement to, the public life of streets, plazas and parks.

There are demographic, economic, and psychological reasons why a reconsideration of shared outdoor space is particularly appropriate at this time. With increasing numbers of families where both parents are employed, the presence of a safe and interesting communal play space *right outside* the house is particularly attractive. This is equally true for single-parent families. Gone are the days, for most families, where mother is at home all day to walk or drive children to a nearby park. The potential sociability of a traffic-free, green area at the heart of a community (the shared outdoor space) is appealing not only to those with children, but to the increasing number of single-person households (both young and elderly).

Finally, the presence of shared outdoor space whose management and maintenance may be shared by the group provides an opportunity for people to have some sense of control over their nearby environment and to mold it to their needs as time goes by. The residents of St. Francis Square, for example, have made numerous changes to the shared outdoor areas of their community as needs have changed during the almost 40-year history of the co-op. Outside the private dwelling of its associated private outdoor space, there are relatively few opportunities for small groups to have some sense of accomplishment through hands-on manipulation of the local

environment.* A study of a low-rise housing project (Ida B. Wells, Chicago) determined that residents involved in greening activities (planting flowers or caring for plants and trees in shared outdoor spaces) experienced stronger neighboring ties and a greater sense of community; felt a greater sense of ownership over these spaces; picked up the litter more often and felt they had greater control over what happened in such spaces, than residents who were not engaged in greening activities (Brunson, Kuo, and Sullivan, *in press*). Evidence from interviews in communities with shared outdoor space indicates that this “working together” on the shared near-home environment provides a profound sense of shared responsibility and community (Cooper, 1971; Cooper Marcus, 1992).

To summarize, the advantages to residents whose dwellings look out onto shared landscaped space include:

- (1) outlook onto a quiet, natural setting providing a balanced contrast to a street view;
- (2) lower perceived densities where views to nearby dwellings are screened by the growth of mature trees;
- (3) provision of a safe, appealing areas for children’s play within sight or calling distance of home and not separated from it by traffic;
- (4) access to a park-like setting immediately adjacent to the dwelling where causal encounters with neighbors may occur;
- (5) provision of a setting which is unambiguously the shared territory of a group of neighbors who are likely to informally monitor activities and behavior;
- (6) the development over time of a sense of neighborliness among those who view, use, monitor and help to maintain or modify such a space.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A GREEN LANDSCAPE IN SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE

A series of significant studies conducted by researchers at the University of Illinois provide compelling evidence for the importance of shared outdoor spaces with grass and trees, versus comparable spaces that are hard-surfaced. The amount of time residents spent in equal-sized common spaces in two inner-city neighborhoods was strongly predicted by the presence, location, and number of trees (Coley, Kuo, and Sullivan, 1997). The closer trees were to residential buildings, the more people spent time outside near them. “The historical structures of respected ‘old heads’—adults in the neighborhood who watched out for, disciplined, and befriended children—are largely absent in today’s ghettos, while the prevalence of single-parent families and absent and unemployed male figures has contributed to lower levels of child supervision. . . . The results of this study indicate that trees draw mixed groups of children and adults outdoors together. It is likely that the presence of adults both increases the children’s

* Some opportunities that do exist are Adopt-a-Park schemes; Earth Day beach clean-ups; Sierra Club member trail maintenance; house repair or construction through Habitat for Humanity or Christmas in April; volunteer maintenance or gardening on church or school properties; and community gardening.

supervision and also increases their opportunities to interact personally with adults in their neighborhood” (op. cit., p. 490).

It is critical that we assign adequate budgets to the planting and landscaping of such settings. A study comparing outdoor activities in low- and high-vegetation courtyards at Ida B. Wells public housing project in Chicago found that in the relatively barren spaces, levels of play and access to adults were approximately half as much as those found in spaces with more grass and trees, and the incidence of creative play was significantly lower in the former. A study in Robert Taylor Homes found that “the more vegetation there was in a shared common space, the stronger the neighborhood ties near that space—compared to residents living adjacent to relatively barren spaces, individuals living adjacent to greener common spaces had more social activities and more visitors, knew more of their neighbors, reported their neighbors were more concerned with helping and supporting one another, and had stronger feelings of belonging (Kuo, Sullivan, Coley, and Brunson, 1998B, p. 843). An intriguing suggestion in the above study is that, to the extent that the presence of greenery in common spaces leads to more use and stronger social networks, and that neighbors with strong social ties are more effective at exercising control over unwanted behaviors, “the greening of these spaces may yield surprising indirect benefits in the form of lower levels of crime” (op. cit., p. 848). The authors conclude that shared green spaces may be especially pertinent in providing settings for informal social contact in neighborhoods such as many public housing projects where neighbors have a great deal in common (in terms of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and presence of children at home), and where many residents are severely limited in terms of mobility (lack of transport and low income) and thus are constrained in their access to both places and people outside the neighborhood (op. cit., p. 845). Indeed, it seems likely that availability of informal social contacts in shared outdoor space may be critically important in low-income communities where residents have few options other than nearby neighbors for social support and sharing of resources.

ORIENTATION TO SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE AND ORIENTATION TO THE STREET

Does orientation to shared outdoor space mean that the street frontage does not engage the larger city environment? This is a valid concern and the answer is that this could happen, but doesn't have to. In the case of Southside Park, Victorian-style houses with porches face the street across from similar neighborhood dwellings, while the backs of houses face the shared landscape space in the rear.

St. Francis Square is not so successful in this regard with porches, patios and architectural detailing facing the inner courtyards, and rather bland facades with fire escapes facing the surrounding streets. There are entries to each group of six apartments sharing an interior stair from both the street and the court. Because of activity in the courtyards, considerable personalization on balconies and patios, and the presence of a busy eight-lane highway (Geary Boulevard) on one long side of the development, the life of the Square is definitely introverted. Later redevelopment schemes in this part of San Francisco (known as the Western Addition) took note of this and some were designed with attractive porches on the street-side as well as landscaped shared space and private patios at the back. Just because interior block shared space exists does not mean that street life is ignored. The Meadows and Montgomery Park are good

examples of successful orientations to both community life inside the block and public life on the street.

Does the creation of a community that is partially introverted result in an “exclusive enclave?” It could do, but in many cases, the opposite is true. In many cohousing communities the strength of neighborliness has “spilled out” into the surrounding environment, such that defunct neighborhood associations have been resurrected (as at Southside Park, for example), and the cohousing common house has become the venue for neighborhood meetings. Because people become involved in a small group, such as a typical cohousing community of 30-40 households, they are in fact *more* likely to become engaged in wider neighborhood concerns and meet people outside their “enclave.”¹

SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE AND HEALTH

Americans are becoming more sedentary; obesity is on the rise. The provision of attractive, landscaped shared outdoor space in a variety of settings has the potential for generating positive health outcomes. Where it is incorporated within student housing or neighborhoods where many young adults live, the space is likely to be used for pick-up ball games, frisbee, etc.² Where such space is an intrinsic component of senior housing, assisted living facilities, or facilities for people with Alzheimer’s disease, residents are more likely to walk. Research indicates that exercise contributes to improved physical and mental health among older people.

If such space is incorporated into neighborhoods where there are families with children, the undoubted beneficiaries are the children and their care-givers. Children are becoming less and less active. In this automobile-dominated culture, children are being driven to school, to after-school events, to recreation facilities. Between 1977 and 1995, walking and bicycle trips by children aged between 5 and 15 dropped by 40%. For trips to school of one mile or less, only 31% are now made by walking (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2000).

In a report to the President on “Promoting better health for young people ...” it is stated: “Our nation’s young people are, in large measure, inactive, unfit, and increasingly overweight. ... Physical inactivity has contributed to an unprecedented epidemic of childhood obesity that is currently plaguing the United States. The percentage of young people who are overweight has doubled since 1980” (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2000).

Particularly alarming—and under-reported—is the fact that an increasing number of school districts are eliminating recess. “As many as four out of ten schools nationwide, and 80 percent of the schools in Chicago, have decided there’s no time for recess. Instead of romping in playgrounds, kids are being channeled into more classes in an effort to make their test scores rise

¹ Conversation with Chuck Durrett of McCamant Durrett Architects, formerly known as the Cohousing Company.

² Observations in student housing at Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley, and at The Meadows.

on an ever-higher curve.... If swings, ball fields, and jungle gyms are forbidden territory, we could end up raising a generation of fast-food fatsoes” (Schudel, 2001).

This regrettable policy provides one more argument for the provision of attractive, usable, safe outdoor areas immediately adjacent to home, so that at least *after*-school children may have the benefit of outdoor play. It is *not* sufficient to provide sidewalks and neighborhood parks, though these are also important. Many parents of children under the age of c. 8 will not permit their children to play unsupervised in public space (sidewalk, park). Just incorporating green spaces (square, park, village green) in a new neighborhood by no means guarantees that parents will have the time or inclination to take their children there. A shared space right “outside the backdoor” is much more likely to be used for unsupervised play in those important periods before dinner, after dinner, after homework, on weekends and school holidays, thus promoting health through exercise. (Though not the topic of this article, the popularity of cul-de-sac is partially due to their use as safe, near-home play spaces for young children.)

SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE IN PUBLIC HOUSING

The experience of shared open space in public housing has been mixed. Looking at projects in the San Francisco Bay Area, we can find examples that range from excellent to disastrous. Holly Court, dating from 1940, with a density close to that of the surrounding neighborhood, some buildings facing the street, and a carefully [arranged] hierarchy of private and shared outdoor spaces, is still a sought-after development (Dev, Gelfand & Herrington, 1994).

Sunnydale, much larger, with rows of barracks-like buildings, no private yards and undeveloped, undefined expanses of littered, shared outdoor space, providing easy escape routes for drug dealers, is the most severely troubled development in San Francisco. The most significant features of its redesign by architects Marquis Associates, along with associated architects Powell & Partners, will be to restructure the open space so that there is a clear hierarchy of territorial control. All units will have fenced backyards; some shared outdoor spaces will be retained with access limited to adjacent units (op. cit.).

The replacement of high-rise Yerba Buena Plaza West with the neo-Victorian flats and row houses of Pitts Plaza provided fenced front- and backyards, and a mid-block shared space with a play area accessed only through the units or a community building. The replacement of high-rise Yerba Buena Plaza East with street-facing townhouses has entirely eliminated shared outdoor space in favor of fenced backyards (op. cit.).

A significant experiment turning shared outdoor space into an income-generating resource is worth noting. At Alemany Development, residents together with San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners (SLUG) have transformed unclaimed areas of shared space into a thriving commercial urban garden, creating training and employment opportunities for unemployed youth (op. cit.).

Dealing with the issue of shared outdoor space in the redesign of rundown housing projects must follow a site-by-site approach. The blanket elimination of such space just because it hasn't worked in some places is a misguided policy.

Recently revised guidelines for “Designing and Developing Hope VI Neighborhoods” recognize the importance of shared outdoor spaces in revitalized public housing projects. Unfortunately, these same guidelines recommend two elements in their design which may seriously compromise their usefulness: one, that they be accessible to outsiders by bike and footpath; and two, that the shared outdoor space be separated from homes by a street. Ease of accessibility by outsiders, either by footpath or by an encircling street, will most likely transform the image of this space into that of a public park, thus compromising its function as a setting for social interaction, territorial monitoring, and safe children's play among a known group of neighbors of limited size. Territorial clarity and the delimitation of shared space that is not accessible to “outsiders” is especially important in public housing and high density urban settings.

SHARED OUTDOOR SPACE AND NEW URBANISM

It is important that we reconsider the communities and research discussed above and pay attention to existing research on site planning and community (Gehl, 1987; Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian, 1986) in view of the current New Urbanist (NU) debate regarding suburban design and public housing redesign. NU principles decry the use of culs-de-sac, favor a return to the grid, and emphasize public parks bounded by through streets. While such parks are definitely important in neighborhood design, the social significance of shared outdoor space which is *not* fully public seems to have been overlooked. Combing the NU literature, the most frequent reference to space shared by a group (and not fully public) is the alley, a design device to ensure that curb cuts and garages do not mar the streetscape and that houses can be sited closer together. While these are laudable goals, it seems unlikely that a sense of local identity can be facilitated as much by these utilitarian passageways as it is by the provision of common greens bounded by the units they serve. Even more disturbing is the assertion by some NU developers that the ubiquitous alleys are “places for children to play.” It doesn't take much imagination to suggest that the play experience (and possibly subsequent environmental values) of children offered play space that doubles as a setting for cars, trash cans, recycling bins, and power lines will be vastly different from that of children, such as those at Village Homes, for example, growing up amid creeks, fruit trees, wildlife, and gardens.

The most recent version of the *Municipal Smart Code* refers to five categories of public outdoor space—park, green, square, plaza and playground (see Civic Space Standards, section 6.10)—but has no category for shared outdoor space as defined above. The most recent version of *The Lexicon of the New Urbanism* (Duany Plater-Zyberk and Company, Nov. 1, 1999) defines two categories of open space that are comparable to shared outdoor space as here defined. These are the close and the quadrangle; as well as two categories of housing arrangement: the private block and the compound.

However, in these publications, as in much planning and design literature, these categories of place are defined and described in general terms of location, form, landscape, etc.,

but not in terms of how they are likely to be used, or the necessity to pay attention to design details as described above. NU-inspired building codes are increasingly being adopted and while many of their goals and principles are undoubtedly positive, the types of site plans which have been unarguably successful, such as those at St. Francis Square, Village Homes, Cherry Hill, and Southside Park seem to be being legislated out of existence.

To give but one example, Charles Durrett, principal at McCamant Durrett Architects in Berkeley, Calif., was recently asked by Burbank Housing Corporation to prepare a site plan for a development of affordable rental housing in Windsor, Calif., principally for low-income Hispanic families. On a flag-shaped lot bounded by a creek and an existing subdivision, Durrett created a site plan with clustered parking, units facing onto a pedestrian street, and with ample shared outdoor space in the form of a village green, a soccer field, community gardens, and a tot lot. While the client accepted this design as appropriate (they had had success with a limited access scheme with shared outdoor space at Cherry Hill), the City Planning Commission rejected it. Their argument, based on NU principles, was that the site *must* have a through street, that shared outdoor space “doesn’t work,” and that clustering housing around such space creates, in effect, a “ghetto.” The architect, who has designed, or consulted on the design of, numerous cohousing developments with highly successful shared outdoor space, reluctantly redesigned the site to meet the city’s requirements. The amended site plan has a through street; half the houses facing a parking lot; a small common green bounded by a street and parking; and the bill for infrastructure increasing from half a million dollars to one million dollars due to the required provision of catch basins (the original plan had storm water filtered on site), and due to the fact that the amended plan has twice as much asphalt as the original plan. The architect lobbied for picnic tables and a play area in the common green, but the play area was cut to one-fifth of its proposed size and picnic tables eliminated because “they will be a problem.” The designers are quite concerned about the possibility of child-pedestrian accidents due to the location of the green across a through street from many of the units. Ironically, the development still retains its original name—Winter Creek Village—despite the fact that it has been stripped of almost all of its village-like attributes.

The conclusions of all the above-quoted studies suggest that the category of outdoor space which has been defined here as shared outdoor space is of great significance in providing a setting for casual social interaction; for strengthening social networks at the local neighborhood level; for children’s play; and for enhancing a sense of responsibility and safety in the neighborhood. These findings are particularly pertinent in lower-income settings where residents may not be able to sustain wider social networks or take their children to areas of public recreation; and in all settings where there are likely to be families with children.

Just because shared outdoor spaces in public housing and Planned Unit Developments were poorly understood, inadequately designed, and under-used in the past does not justify throwing out this significant category of outdoor space in contemporary medium- and high-density housing. Let us draw on what we know; what residents who use and value such space have to tell us; and provide shared outdoor settings as green oases in today’s newly-built and re-designed urban and suburban neighborhoods.

In an article that appears to take issue with Brill's argument presented at the opening of this paper, Emily Talen states: "The best that can be done is, first, to make sure that design doesn't actively get in the way of social interaction and, second, to provide venues that allow for a variety of types of civic engagement. It doesn't matter if one then meets strangers or neighbors in these places. Both types of interaction can happen, both are important, and it is neither necessary, desirable nor plausible to focus on venues that exclude one or the other.... The issue of community life versus public life is thus a straw man."

This statement, with which I respectfully disagree, appeared in a section of *Places* headed "To Rally Discussion." Let us hope that the debate continues, that we look at other kinds of settings that may enhance community life, and that we pay heed to one of Brill's conclusions. "A piece of important work for us all would be to seek more appropriate forms, by understanding community life more fully (and how it differs from public life), in some joint effort by those in psychology, sociology, anthropology, urban design and landscape architecture, and by citizens."

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